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ABSTRACT

This study examined perceptions held by teacher consultants, or mentors, of their role in a state-mandated Entry Year Assistance program in Oklahoma. Twenty-six teacher consultants participated in the study, responding to open-ended questions in interviews which sought their views on their roles as consultants to beginning teachers and their ability to fulfill those roles. Subjects were also queried on what professional benefits they felt they acquired through serving as mentors. One factor cited as important in the role of the consultant was the necessity of sharing one's own failures, as well as successes, with new teachers. A second factor in terms of importance was that of interpersonal skills-fostering good communication; being patient, open, and flexible; and providing sympathy and empathy. A third factor identified by teacher consultants was that of nurturing collegial relationships with beginning teachers. Professional benefits that teacher consultants derived from participation in this program included: recognition of their own teaching practices and abilities; realization of their function as models for beginning teachers; accessibility to new ideas and materials; and strong professional ties with peers. A three-page list of references concludes the study. (JD)

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The Teacher Consultant Role: Impact on the Profession

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of HB 1706, or the Teacher Education Reform Act of 1980, in the state of Oklahoma has meant an increase of responsibilities for those involved in classroom teaching through their service on Entry Year Committees in the capacity of teacher consultants.

The intent of this qualitative study is to determine the impact of this new role on teacher consultants by examining perceptions held of their roles and professional benefits accrued as a result of involvement in the Entry Year Assistance Program. Twenty-six (26) teacher consultants representing elementary and secondary teaching levels were interviewed for the study.

The findings suggest that teacher consultants view their roles in terms of the following "patterns of behavior" (Wallen and Travers, 1963): resource person, support person, problems solver, evaluator, and provider of "work socialization" (Lortie, 1975). They felt that their own teaching experiences, possession of interpersonal skills and process skills, plus the ability to nurture collegial relationships with beginning teachers enabled them to successfully perform their roles. Teacher consultants also believed they had benefitted professionally through involvement in the program.

The study supports results of other studies that efforts to encourage professional self-determination can be successful.

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Introduction

In 1980, the Oklahoma Legislature passed House Bill 1706, the Teacher Education Reform Act. This legislation had the complete support of all public and private institutions of Higher Education in Oklahoma. The major intent of this legislation was the improvement of teacher performance through additional program development. Improvement was to be achieved through three major program thrusts directed at critical stages of teacher development: (1) competency testing for preservice teachers, (2) an Entry Year Assistance Program for beginning teachers, and (3) staff development for certified, practicing teachers Kindergarten through University. The purpose of this study is to examine role perceptions of one category of participants in the Entry-Year Assistance portion of the total legislative package, i.e., that of the teacher consultant.

To understand the role of the teacher consultant, one must first understand the structure of the Entry Year Assistance Program. The Entry Year Assistance portion of the legislation mandates the creation of a "legal committee" referred to as the Entry Year Committee for each beginning teacher. It is the responsibility of this committee to gather and assess information regarding the teaching competencies of the first-year teacher, as well as to provide assistance to the beginning teacher in the

development of those competencies. Each committee is composed of an administrator from the first-year teacher's school district, a teacher consultant from the same school district, and a representative of an institution of Higher Education, preferably from the teacher's alma mater where possible. Previous studies have indicated that committee members and entry-year teachers identify the position of teacher consultant to be central to the success of the Entry Year Program (King, 1985; Godley, Klug, and Wilson, 1985; and Combs, 1985).

The implementation of House Bill 1706 has increased responsibilities for those involved in classroom teaching through their service in the capacity of teacher consultant. These new responsibilities include evaluation of and consultation with a first-year teacher. The teacher consultant on the Entry Year Committee must possess a standard Oklahoma teaching certificate and have an educational background similar to the first-year teacher. Usually the consultant is a colleague working in the same building and often in a very similar assignment as the beginning teacher. The legislation specifies that the teacher consultant must spend a minimum of seventy-two (72) hours in observation and consultation with the entry-year teacher during the year. This includes the three required periods of formal observation and three required committee meetings which are performed on site at the descretion of

the committee members. For this service, the teacher consultant receives a stipend through the Oklahoma State Department of Education (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 1982).

Before assessing our findings, it is useful to review the literature on peer assistance within the teaching profession.

Peer Assistance

That teachers will allow themselves to be assisted in improving their instruction seems more than a tentative possibility. Research has shown that teachers can become more motivated and more understanding of their work through the cycle of clinical supervision (Glickman, 1985). While Fuller (1969) found that beginning teachers initially concern themselves only with their own adequacies and perceived inadequacies, she also found that these preoccupations gradually gave way to concerns about students and their teaching. Brooks (1985) has proposed that beginning teachers need models in order to be successful in the initial weeks of school. A number of researchers suggest that in order to make adaptations while not compromising programs, teachers need to be provided with continuous guidance and direction (Cogan, 1974; Gusky, 1985; and Kent, 1985).

Several forms of mentorship for teachers have evolved in the past decade, ranging from informal systems to highly

formalized programs. In examining mentor relationships in a variety of professions, Bova and Phillips (1984) found that mentors were typically influential persons who helped proteges achieve their life goals. Proteges learned how to act in their professions by observing their mentors. Gehrke and Kay (1984) reached a number of conclusions concerning the relationships between proteges and their mentors. These relationships are characterized by openness, informality, and a high degree of interaction. Proteges seem to be highly influenced by their mentors in their decision making. In the teaching profession, individuals who had been informally mentored tended to provide the same types of services to neophytes in the profession.

Teacher assistance programs which include a form of mentorship rely on possession of specific skills by those who are in the helping position. Wagner (1985) identified the following skills as necessary in the position: communication, modeling of exemplary teaching, leadership abilities, building of trusting relationships, and completion of mentoring tasks. In addition, Servatius and Young (1985) have identified analytical abilities, self-confidence, creativity, flexibility, interpersonal skills, and responsibility as important skills for the success of the mentoring relationship.

A number of researchers (Parkey, 1986; Showers, 1985; Little, 1985; and Gray and Gray, 1985) have identified

professional benefits which seem to accompany mentoring or assisting types of relationships. These benefits include sharing of materials and techniques, developing collegial relationships, and being treated as professionals. Individuals acquired new knowledge of materials and strategies, clarified their own instructional goals and objectives, and grew in their understanding of the circumstances under which students learned through participation in these associations. Also common to these findings were that encouragement and support were key elements of the assisting relationships.

Procedures of the Current Study

This study is a follow-up of two earlier studies which made use of quantitative and qualitative methods to determine the role perceptions of all three Entry Year Committee members. In the first study (Godley and Wilson, 1984), committee members were asked to respond to a questionnaire in which they gave their perceptions of their roles as they had performed them. In the second study (Godley, Klug, and Wilson, 1985), entry-year teachers were interviewed concerning their perceptions of the roles of their Entry Year Committee members and the effects of the process on the beginning teachers' professional development. It was through the latter study that the pivotal role of teacher consultants on Entry Year Committees came to the attention of the researchers.

In the present study, it was decided that qualitative methods would be used to examine the impressions held by teacher consultants in the field concerning their roles and the professional benefits they had accrued by assumption of these roles. Forty-four (44) 1984-85 teacher consultants were asked to participate in this study; of this group, twenty-six (26) teacher consultants were actually interviewed. Selection of respondants was dependent upon availability and willingness to be interviewed. No attempt was made to distinguish weak from strong teacher consultants, rather the intent was to represent a range of teacher consultants who were participating in the Entry Year process. Of the teachers interviewed, nineteen were female and seven were male. They ranged in age from thirty to sixty, the majority (77%) of whom were thirty-five to fifty years of age. Seventy-seven percent (77%) had eleven to twenty years of experience in public school teaching, with the range of experience represented from nine to twenty-nine years. Teachers participating in the study were employed in school districts ranging in size from less than one-hundred (100) to more than fifteen-thousand (15,000) students, with the median employed in districts of less than seven-hundred (700) students. Fourteen of the interviewees taught at the elementary level, twelve at the secondary level.

A standard structured interview schedule was devised according to guidelines provided by Pelto and Pelto (1978).

This consisted of nine open-ended questions utilized to elicit teacher consultants' perceptions of their roles (see Appendix A). The research questions used to guide the study were the following:

1. How do teacher consultants view their roles and their ability to fulfill these roles?
2. What professional benefits do teacher consultants acquire as a result of having served in this capacity?

The interviews conducted ranged from fifteen to sixty minutes in length, depending upon how verbal the particular teacher interviewed chose to be in responding to questions asked during the interview process. Responses made by interviewees were recorded using a casette tape recorder and later transcribed for analysis.

The data collected were examined by response area for consistent patterns or themes concerning the Entry Year process and the role played by interviewees in this process expressed across a number of teacher consultants. A thematic scheme was developed from the previously cited review of the literature and previous research. Patterns were identified through concensus; items of concensus were then reformulated into concepts which seemed holistically descriptive of teacher consultants' perceptions of their roles. A theme was judged as present if addressed by a minimum of 35% (9) or more teachers. These response areas

were: patterns of role behavior, difficulties encountered in fulfilling roles, selection criteria for participation on the Entry Year Committees, teacher consultants' perceptions of skills needed to successfully fulfill their roles, and professional benefits acquired as a result of participation on the Entry Year Committee.

Findings

Role Perceptions

This study found that teacher consultants viewed they had performed in the "patterns of behavior," (Wallen and Travers, 1963) consistent with those identified in the earlier study by the researchers (Godley, Klug, and Wilson, 1985). These patterns are: resource person, supplying information concerning resources, materials, and ideas, noted by 69% (18) of those interviewed; support person, bolstering the beginning teachers' concepts of themselves, noted by 60% (16); problem solver, suggesting possible solutions to problems encountered by beginning teachers, noted by 40% (12); evaluator, assessing both formally and informally beginning teachers' skills and abilities, noted by 63% (17); and provider of "work socialization," (Lortie, 1975) introducing the beginning teachers to their new workplace, colleagues, and routines to be followed, noted by 50% (13). The teacher consultants' views of their roles were tied to the actual performace of these roles and not to preconceived ideas of these roles. While some of the

respondants addressed all patterns of behavior recorded above, the majority seemed to address those patterns they more frequently engaged in while actually working with first-year teachers. The patterns which manifested themselves thus seemed to represent responses to entry-year teachers' needs made by their particular teacher consultants.

Factors Imperative for Successful Role Performance

While 62% (16) of teacher consultants interviewed stated that they had been chosen to be members of Entry Year Committees because they either taught at the same grade level or in the same subject matter, none of the teachers interviewed indicated they believed this element constituted a major success factor for acting as a teacher consultant. Rather, teacher consultants saw experience in the teaching field and the work place (i.e., particular school districts in which they worked) to be the prime factor. Teacher consultants frequently mentioned citing their own teaching experiences as examples in providing suggestions or support to the beginning teacher. These teachers felt it was imperative to share their failures, as well as successes, with new teachers in order to help provide them with more realistic expectations of the teaching profession and teaching environment. Typical of this perception is illustrated in the following comment made by a teacher consultant:

> Set up a kind of relationship where they will feel free to share their failures. I think one way that can be done is by your sharing (your) failures and some of the problems you have. I think that is very important, too, (to know) that it is alright to make mistakes-- to have really messed up this lesson or have a really bad afternoon-- and to talk about it. There has to be that kind of relationship and atmosphere established, that it's okay (to make mistakes), that we all do it and try to learn from those times that we do make mistakes.

The second factor in terms of importance identified by teacher consultants was that of interpersonal skills. Sixty-five percent (17) of the teacher consultants observed that interpersonal skills were a key ingredient in the mentor-protege associations. Included in these skills were fostering good communication; being patient, open, and flexible when working with the first-year teacher; and providing sympathy to and being empathetic with the new teachers. Fifty percent (13) of the teacher consultants maintained it was essential to create an atmosphere that was non-threatening to the entry-year teacher. In addition, teacher consultants indicated the need to provide positive reinforcement to new teachers in order to help them effectively judge the development of their own teaching abilities, as suggested in the remark of one teacher consultant:

> You have to be flexible and you have to be accepting of that teacher, sympathetic to the stress levels that the new teacher is going through and the frustrations. Be supportive, lots of counseling needs to go on.... I think the ultimate encouragement is that it's alright that you're having feelings of inadequacy and what did I ever learn in school, because that's where these feelings are going to come out, is in the Entry Year.

A third factor identified by teacher consultants was that of nurturing collegial relationships with beginning teachers. Thirty-eight percent (10) of the respondants supported this view. Collegial skills include treating neophytes as equals, as full colleagues, and allowing them to commit their own mistakes and learn from those mistakes. These teacher consultants expressed the need to model teaching skills for their entry-year teachers. Entry-year teachers were taken "under the wings" of their teacher consultants and shown how to act in their new areas of work. In addition, these teachers asserted there was a need for the teacher consultants to be leaders and take the initiative in establishing relationships with new teachers, not to wait until problems began to emerge. The need to establish collegial relationships is seen in the statement which follows:

> It doesn't seem to me that it would work at all if there was not a colleague-type of relationship, where

> the first-year teacher was not comfortable in talking and sharing with the consultant teacher. There must be a non-threatening communication, so that the consultant teacher can make suggestions.

A fourth factor identified by teacher consultants was that of process skills, i.e., those skills necessary to carry out the functions of the Entry Year Assistance Program. This area was addressed by 77% (20) of teacher consultants interviewed. Being accessible to the entry-year teacher when needed was considered of paramount importance and was linked to the proximity of the beginning teachers' classrooms to teacher consultants' classrooms. Of utmost concern was the ability and willingness to be frank and honest with the beginning teacher when corrections of teaching practices needed to be made. At the same time, teacher consultants were aware of the need to remain supportive of entry-year teachers as they learned how to develop their craft during this important year. These concerns are evident in the following comment made by a teacher consultant:

> You must be sensitive to their needs and yet not treat them like a child. Be honest. I think it is absolutely critical that you be reality-oriented and be blatently honest with them -- what they're doing wrong and what you think they ought to do about it. If they're doing something lousy, tell them.

In general, teacher consultants felt they were successful in fullfilling the functions of their roles in providing assistance to beginning teachers. Many teacher consultants indicated that they enjoyed the formative evaluation phases of the program and did not encounter difficulties with meeting beginning teachers for purposes of consultation. One area of difficulty experienced by 73% (19) of teacher consultants interviewed consisted of scheduling time for formal observation periods which entailed leaving their own classrooms to observe entry-year teachers at work. Substitute teachers had to be found to cover teacher consultants' classrooms or schedules rearranged to permit observation periods. Another area of concern expressed by 35% (9) of the interviewees entailed the adoption of the new role of evaluator for their peers. These teachers felt the task of committing in writing for committee meetings their comments, advice, and suggestions concerning the beginning teachers' pedagogical abilities as particularly discomforting to them. One teacher consultant expressed this concern in the following:

> Actually having to formalize my criticisms and to be able to put them on paper in an objective way so they could benefit the teacher, that's hard to do. It's a lot easier to discuss it with them than to actually write it down.

Professional Benefits Accrued by Teacher Consultants

In addition to the above, all twenty-six teacher consultants interviewed for this study expressed that they had benefitted professionally through their involvement in the Entry Year Assistance Program. Benefits perceived by the teachers include enhancement of professional experience, collegial skills and process skills described above. In having been chosen to act as teacher consultants, 77% (20) of the interviewees felt they had been recognized for their expertise in the teaching profession, and that they had made an important contribution to the Entry Year Committees on which they served. Acting in this role encouraged them to re-examine their own teaching practices and skills (81% or 21), recognizing that they were providing modeling for the new teachers. Fifty percent (13) of the teacher consultants cited access to new ideas through their associations with beginning teachers as a professional benefit they received through participation in the program. It was felt by 73% (19) of the teacher consultants that entry-year teachers had direct benefit through the mentorship role provided by teacher consultants.

The following comments illustrate this area:

> It has helped me to get a better perspective on the whole teaching profession. It has helped me to maybe find ways that I can be a better teacher in my own classroom. And it has given me a good feeling about my

profession, my job, my fellow workers. It has been good for me. It kind of renewed me and gave me a lift and a person needs that every once in awhile. After eight years of teaching, I needed a lift!

Just the fact that both of my teachers have said, "Thank you, I appreciate it," was rewarding. And knowing that maybe I did do some good, maybe I did help them, was enough.

Conclusions and Discussion

The results of this study confirm the results of earlier studies concerning the benefits of mentor or assisting relationships for both mentors and their proteges. The teacher consultants in this study performed in a capacity similar to mentors as their goals were assisting entry-year teachers obtain their Oklahoma teaching certificates. Many of these individuals reported that it was personally satisfying for them to see the beginning teachers grow in their teaching skills and work towards successful completion of the Entry Year Assistance Program. Teacher consultants became mentors in all respects of the term, including becoming their "sponsors, door-openers, and protectors (Gray and Gray, 1985)" in the work place.

The reported patterns of behavior engaged by teacher consultants in the performance of their roles (i.e., resource person, support person, problem solver, evaluator,

and provider of work socialization) confirm the results of the previous study by the researchers which concentrated on the perceptions of beginning teachers concerning the role performance of their teacher consultants (Godley, Klug, and Wilson, 1985). In addition, these patterns of behavior parallel the reports described in other studies of the role performance of those involved in mentor-type relationships. Despite feeling uncomfortable with the charge of formally evaluating beginning teachers who were their peers and that the assistance provided was not at the voluntary request of the beginning teachers they served, teacher consultants in this study seemed to embrace the various facets of mentorship as central to their roles.

Presenting a lack of specific knowledge of subject areas taught by the entry-year teacher did not seem to be perceived as a hindrance to teacher consultants' role performance. On the other hand, experience in teaching and in the workplace was considered by interviewees to be essential in the successful performance of their roles. Other skills which seemed to carry importance were interpersonal skills, collegial skills, and process skills as described above. This finding also parallels the results of studies concerning the skills necessary for the successful fulfillment of mentor or assisting relationships.

Professional benefits derived from participation in the Entry Year Assistance Program by teacher consultants in this

study include the following: recognition of and evaluation of their own teaching practices and abilities; realization of their function as models for beginning teachers who are developing their teaching skills; becoming accessible to new ideas and materials through close association with new teachers; and the development of strong professional ties with their peers, namely the entry-year teachers. Teacher consultants expressed positive impressions concerning the professional benefits of maintaining mentor-protege relationships for the beginning teachers also. In fact, many teacher consultants expressed they would have liked to have had similar types of associations when they began their own teaching careers.

Implications

The importance of providing beginning teachers with opportunities for building professional relations within the working environment can not be understated. These professional gains are not limited to new teachers, but extend to the many individuals who interact with them. Furthermore, participation in an assisting relationship aids in the establishment of a climate of collegiality that extends beyond the teacher consultant-beginning teacher diad.

Given the sensitive nature of assessing one's peers, administrators and representatives of Higher Education should be aware of the potential need to provide guidance to

teacher consultants. Preparing teacher consultants with the tools of clinical supervision may serve as one solution to alleviate anxiety concerning evaluation some teachers may experience. This would also afford an opportunity for teacher consultants to sharpen their observation skills and increase their understanding of the supervisory process.

The results of this study and others cited suggest that efforts to encourage professional self-determination can be successful. As benefits from participation in the Entry Year Assistance Program have been realized by participants, support for the program has continued to grow in the public school sector. Programs such as the Entry Year Assistance Program do seem to provide, to those who are active participants, welcome opportunities for successful growth.

As a consequence of exploring perceptions of the Entry Year Assistance Program held by beginning teachers (1985) and teacher consultants, the curiosity of the researchers has been roused concerning perceptions held by the two remaining participants in the process, the administrators and representatives of Higher Education. Of particular interest is the area of professional benefits received which may be attributed to their participation in the program. Plans are currently being formulated to interview administrators, to be followed by representatives of Higher Education, who have been or who are currently involved in the Entry Year Assistance Program.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSULTING TEACHERS

Appendix A

1. What is your perception of the Entry-Year Assistance Program?
2. How were you selected to be a teacher consultant?
3. Of the tasks you were asked to perform as teacher consultant, which were you least comfortable with?
4. As teacher consultant, which task did you find most rewarding?
5. What factors did you find to be a hinderance to your performance in the role of teacher consultant?
6. In what ways did your role compliment the role of the other committee members?
7. Do you feel that serving as a teacher consultant has had an effect on your professionalism? How?
8. What skills or personality traits did you find valuable in assiting a beginning teacher?
9. What advice would you give a prospective teacher consultant?